

Inside the images of war

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D-Day remembered: 1944 | 2004

The blurry picture of a soldier in the Omaha Beach surf has become an iconic image of World War II, one of a number of photographs taken in generations of wars that possess the power to evoke strong emotions years, even decades later.

For decades, Huston Riley has quietly held the belief that he was the soldier shown struggling through the surf in a famous D-Day photograph.

The grainy black-and-white image, taken by Life magazine photographer Robert Capa, conveyed at once terror and courage and came to represent the collective will of the nameless GIs who stormed Normandy that day 60 years ago.

Life didn't identify the soldier, but Riley's mother instantly recognized the sharp nose, the angled chin. It was her son.

"We subscribed to Life magazine, and she looked at it said, 'My God, there he is,' " said Riley, 83, who lives with his wife, Charlotte, in the Mercer Island home where he grew up.

Today, as America commemorates the anniversary of the Normandy invasion, it does so in the middle of another war, with new images to contemplate.

From slain American civilians hanging from a bridge in Fallujah, to flag-draped caskets awaiting passage home, to U.S. soldiers abusing prisoners at the Abu Ghraib prison, the photographs emerging from Iraq are hardly the stuff of recruiting posters.

But like the iconic D-Day image, they illustrate the enduring power of pictures to shape how a war is viewed now, and by future generations — even in an age of live video.

"Television footage causes a momentary impact, then it is put on a shelf (and) people forget it," said photojournalist Eddie Adams, whose Pulitzer Prize-winning picture of a South Vietnamese general executing a Viet Cong inflamed the anti-war movement in America. What the photo could not show, said Adams, was the Viet Cong soldier opening fire and killing many of the general's comrades shortly before he was captured and then executed.

"A photograph is a moment — it's in print. It becomes embedded and makes a print in your head. Then it reappears in a newspaper, a magazine, a textbook, and you never forget it."

And while we may trust or distrust words, Adams said, "we will believe the photograph."

Their power is such that leaders have often sought to control their message. Newspapers were not allowed to show the dead bodies of Allied soldiers through World War I and into the first stages of World War II.

The government loosened the ban in 1943 in a gamble to stiffen the country's resolve.

"You hear all this stuff about the Greatest Generation, but people were getting edgy about the war," said Hal Buell, a photo historian and retired executive photo editor for The Associated Press. "Roosevelt decided to lift that ban in an attempt to bring the horrors of war home. It turned out to be the right call."

Since the first Gulf War, the Pentagon has prohibited the media from taking pictures of U.S. coffins returning home from the front. Now the administration is withholding additional Abu Ghraib prison photos, calling them evidence in its investigation.

So different are those pictures from the heroic images of World War II: a gritty GI in the surf; the Stars and Stripes raised on Iwo Jima — stuff that kindles a nation's pride.

The picture of the six Marines raising the flag on Mount Suribachi, the most-reproduced image in the history of war photography, was evoked again by Tom Franklin's photograph of firemen raising a flag atop the rubble of New York's Twin Towers after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

"It said, 'Look, we're the same people who won that war, and we're going to survive this too,' " said Buell. "It crossed generations."

Then came Abu Ghraib.

"All of a sudden, Americans are seeing pictures that contradict their definition of themselves," said Buell. " `That can't be us. That's not us. How could our guys do that kind of thing?' "

Not since Vietnam have war photos so sharply provoked questions about America's foreign policy. Most notable among the Vietnam photos were Adams' famous execution picture and the searing image taken by Nick Ut of a 9-year-old girl, naked and burned by napalm, running from her village.

More than two decades later, seeing the girl's outstretched arms and tortured face evokes the same visceral response.

"If the photograph did something to you when you looked at it, like made you laugh or made you cry, it's a good photo," said Adams. "If the picture ripped your heart out, it's a great photo."

Taken by soldiers — not photojournalists — the Abu Ghraib pictures lack the artistry of the Vietnam photos. But they raise similar questions: Why are we here? Whom are we helping?

Time will tell whether ongoing investigations will soften the offenses of the soldiers humiliating their captives while grinning in the Abu Ghraib pictures. They are certainly not the GIs of his day, said Riley of Mercer Island, who supports the war but was dismayed by the pictures.

"I think something like this would have been unheard-of in the past," he said as he sat in his living room talking about the famous photograph in which he believes he is depicted.

Riley is not the first man to lay claim to the grainy yet determined young mug in the Life magazine photograph, which has adorned magazine covers and even French postcards.

But new research by retired college professor Lowell Getz, who reviewed reports of troop and ship movements, plus Riley's uncanny resemblance, likely makes him "the best candidate we will ever have," Getz wrote in this month's issue of World War II magazine.

Riley said he volunteered for the Army in 1942 because "like any young fella, I thought I ought to do my part to defend the country."

By D-Day, Pfc. Riley was already a veteran of two invasions, in North Africa and Sicily. "Kind of the standing joke was, `You did such a good job in North Africa and Sicily, we're going to send you in again,' " Riley said.

Riley remembers spilling out of his landing craft, which had stalled on a sandbar about 100 yards off Omaha Beach. His rifle and equipment dragged him under. Above, he could see bullets pierce the surface in white streaks, lose speed after a few feet and flutter to the ocean floor.

"I think I tried to walk on the bottom, but you can only hold your breath so long," Riley said.

He released his life vests, and like a cork, up he popped. He yanked the vests off and pushed them in front of him, trying to make the beach as bullets whizzed by.

"I was trying to survive," Riley said. "I know they were looking at me because they hit me several times on the backpack and in the shoe a couple times."

Capa, meanwhile, had hitched a ride in a landing craft. The most famed combat photographer of his time, Capa looked more Hollywood star than photographer and ran with the likes of Ernest Hemingway. He was later killed by a land mine in Indochina in 1954.

As Riley struggled forward, he was hit twice in the neck. He recalled a sergeant and a man with cameras strapped around his neck pulling him to safety.

"I remember thinking, `What in the world is he doing here?' " said Riley of the photographer he thinks was Capa.

Riley, who had also been wounded in North Africa, joined men from his regiment and continued fighting until the next day, when he was evacuated to England. Riley rejoined the unit two weeks later but was wounded again — this time more severely.

Sent back to England, it was there that he saw the photograph for the first time in Life's June 19, 1944, issue.

Of the 106 frames Capa shot that morning, only eight survived. The rest were ruined by a darkroom assistant. Though blurry and out of focus, the picture of the lone soldier somehow captured the magnitude of that historic day.

"In that particular case, the blurriness of it really adds to the sense of chaos," said James Kenney, head of the photojournalism department at Western Kentucky University. "When I look at it, it makes me unsettled. I feel a sense of being shaken up, like I'm there."

Riley never made a big deal about that famous image. He never framed it, and only occasionally told friends about it. To this day, the issue sits buried in stacks under a bed with every issue of Life ever published.

Like so many other returning GIs, Riley quietly eased back into society, seldom talking about the war. He graduated from Seattle University and made a career selling fishing rods and other sporting goods.

In 1982, another ex-GI contacted Life, hoping to replace his aging magazine photo. Like Riley, Ed Regan of Atlanta had been shown the photo by his mother after the war and recognized himself. "For 35 years, I never told anyone about it," he would later tell People magazine.

He received a special print from photographer Cornell Capa, brother of Robert, who was convinced it was he.

In 1984, Life interviewed Regan for the 40th anniversary of D-Day and declared him the GI in Capa's photograph. People magazine dubbed him the "Everyman of Omaha Beach."

But Getz believes those assumptions were based primarily on facial similarities. A retired professor from the University of Illinois, Getz first met Riley while researching a World War II book.

Getz was struck by the resemblance between pictures of Riley taken a few months after D-Day and the face in Capa's photo, particularly the protrusion of Riley's chin, the configuration of the mouth, nose and eyes, Getz wrote in World War II magazine.

Getz began combing through war records. He determined that Regan's company came in on the second wave and landed more than 1-½ miles west of where Capa had landed.

Riley, on the other hand, "was in the right place at the right time," Getz concluded. Some years ago, he doesn't recall when exactly, Riley looked up Regan while on a business trip to Atlanta.

Neither man remembered Capa snapping his picture, and Capa didn't stop that day to take names. After swapping a few stories and laughs, each remained certain he was the GI in the photo.

Regan died of lung cancer in 1998, the friendly dispute unresolved. By virtue of how long both men kept quiet about it, both would likely have agreed that what counts most is not who is in the picture, but the courage and sacrifice it represents.

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• Caption: photoRobert Capa / Magnum (0394252476)Huston Riley, seen as a young man in a family photo, right, is believed to be the soldier in the D-Day photograph above. Riley was wounded in the assault on Omaha Beach and recalls being helped by a man with cameras strapped around his neck. (0394251983)Ken Lambert / The Seattle Times : Huston Riley of Mercer Island believes he is the soldier in Robert Capa's famous D-Day photograph, and new research suggests that he is correct. (0394245539)Ruth Orkin / AP : Robert Capa, shown in Paris in 1952, was killed by a land mine in Indochina in 1954. (0311734915)

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